

QUEEN MARIE OF ROMANIA (2019): AN IMPORTANT EPISODE OF ROMANIAN HISTORY FROM A FEMINIST POINT OF VIEW

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Abstract

The history of Romania retold closer to reality, removing the exaggerations of communist aesthetics or mythology, even successfully betting on delicate and contradictory subjects, promoting a reverse Manichaeism or even a right-wing mythology can be seen in the few historical films made after 1989 (not many) or which touch in passing on topics related to national history, especially the modern one. But I will stop at an interesting film, *Queen Marie of Romania (Maria, Regina României)* (2019, Alexis Cahill, Brigitte Drottloff), especially from a feminist perspective, rarely seen in Romanian film. In this film, the king and the crown prince (Ferdinand, respectively the future Carol II) are minimized by caricature, as are the liberal prime minister Ion Brătianu, the British prime minister David Lloyd George or the American president Woodrow Wilson. Instead, Queen Maria of Romania or President Wilson's wife stand out. Unofficial discussions become samples of intelligence and charm, interesting especially from a beautiful and intelligent queen, instead peace conferences or discussions in parliament appear useless and embarrassing. The locations and the sets are magnificent and, a rare thing in Romanian film, the discussions are conducted in four languages, in Romanian, French, German and English, as it was really used in the era in the salons of the upper classes.

Queen Marie was indeed a beautiful and intelligent woman who contributed to the building of Greater Romania, but the exaggerations in this film just ridicule men and the dialogues do not make her seem more intelligent.

Keywords: biopic, archive footage, vulnerability, female monster, historical figure, national propaganda.

Female Monsters and Modern Mythology

In all historical eras people have created monsters with which to populate their mythology. At one time even national cultures and moving pictures offered such creatures. For pragmatic reasons we will focus only on the female ones. The old Greek sailors transformed the manatees into attractive mermaids while Perseus killed one of the three gorgons, those scary sisters with hair made of venomous snakes. Amazons or fighting women were seen both by the ancient Greeks in the Mediterranean and by the Spanish conquistador Francisco de Orellana (1542) in South America, and that is why we have today a river called the Amazon. Likewise, Clemens Brentano and Hans Christian Andersen populated the Rhine, respectively Copenhagen, with mermaids. But in the modern age, especially with the advent of cinema, such monsters

have thrived. Dr. Michaela Queen (Jane Seymour) in the TV series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993–1998, Beth Sullivan), in Colorado Springs immediately after the war of secession, collaborates with Indian healers and offers alternative medicines and even at the invitation of President Ulysses S. Grant she dances at the White House sometime between 1869–1877 (when Grant was on duty) with Byron Sully (Joe Lando), a white man raised by Indians and dressed in a deerskin suit. A recent Sherlock Holmes, Robert Downey Jr. has a fitting female partner, Irene Adler (Rachel McAdams) and both demonstrate their knowledge of martial arts in Guy Ritchie’s film *Sherlock Holmes* (2009, USA-Germany-UK-Australia). Milady de Winter played by Milla Jovovich (*The Three Musketeers*, 2011, USA-Germany-France-UK, Paul W.S. Anderson) manages to steal the queen’s jewels by avoiding genuine spider webs, thus bantering a famous scene where laser beams are avoided in *Mission: Impossible* (1966–1973, USA, Bruce Geller) or participates together with the Duke of Buckingham in the pursuit of the musketeers with the help of airships that was theoretically possible but in fact here a century earlier than in reality. In such cases, we are dealing not only with the colonization of fiction with extraordinary characters, but also with an attempt at alternate history, a kind of speculative fiction called uchronia.

Queen Marie as Screenwriter and Famous Historical Personality

The beautiful and intelligent Queen Marie of Romania¹ appears since 1920 as a screenwriter of a French film², in 2014³ and 2018⁴ she can be spotted in documentaries dedicated to the Russian imperial family and Princess Anastasia while in Romania two documentary films were dedicated to her in 2006⁵ and 2018⁶. Meanwhile, three other Romanian documentaries mirrored Princess Martha Bibescu, another aristocrat and outstanding Romanian writer, contemporary and even rival with the queen⁷. (**Fig. 1**)

As evidence of a truly international reputation of the queen even while she was alive, it seems to me that a novel by Agatha Christie and a film that won four Oscars are more eloquent examples. (**Fig. 2**)

Agatha Christie in her novel *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) has a character, Virginia Revel, wife of the British ambassador in Herzoslovakia who has an illegitimate love affair with

¹ Marie (born Princess Marie Alexandra Victoria of Edinburgh; 29 October 1875 – 18 July 1938) was the last queen of Romania as the wife of King Ferdinand I. Marie was born into the British royal family. Her parents were Prince Alfred, Duke of Edinburgh (later Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha), and Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna of Russia. She married Ferdinand, then crown prince of Romania, in 1892. Marie was crown princess between 1893 and 1914, and queen between 1881–1938.

² *Le lys de la vie* (1920, France, d. Loie Fuller, Gabrielle Sorère) is a lost fiction film. It is René Clair’s debut as an actor (as René Chomette) in the role of the prince. On the poster one can read “d’après le conte de la Reine Marie de Roumanie” (based on the tale of Queen Marie of Romania).

³ *Russia’s Lost Princesses* (2014, TV miniseries for BBC, UK,) based on Helen Rappaport’s book *Four Sisters* (2014). Archive footage show the queen in two episodes: *The World Turned Upside Down* (aired Aug 26, 2014) and *The Gilded Cage* (aired Aug 21, 2014).

⁴ *Weird History* (2018, USA, documentary TV series created by Lazlo Fattenheart). Archive footage show the queen in the episode *The Woman Who Tricked People Into Thinking She Was Anastasia* (2022).

⁵ *Something about Queen Marie (Ceva despre Regina Maria)* (2006, Romania, Mirel Ilieşiu). The queen is featured by actress Maia Morgenstern who reads from the recently published daily diary of the queen.

⁶ *Marie, Heart of Romania (Maria Inima României)* (2018, Romania, TV film, d. Trevor Poots)

⁷ The latest is *Queen Marie in America (Regina Maria în America)* made for the first channel of the Romanian television by Radu Găină, and uses a lot of archival footage especially during the queen’s voyage to America in 1926 and having Adrian-Silvan Ionescu as historical consultant.

a local prince. The situation is reversed with that of Queen Marie but undoubtedly we deal with an allusion to the rumors about Queen Marie's illegitimate affairs. Obviously there are other details that confirm that in her novel Agatha Christie alludes not only to Serbia but also to Romania. The capital of Herzoslovakia is "Ekarest", which sounds similar with "Bucharest", the inhabitants are called "dagos"⁸, it is a kingdom rich in oil, a local prince renounced to the crown in order to marry an unfit woman same as the future King Carol II and Prince Nicolae⁹, etc. Because of the vulnerability of the Romanian royal family in the interwar period, especially because of princes Carol and Nicolae, even an early screening of the novel *Twenty Years After* by Alexandre Dumas, père was banned for a while in our country¹⁰, just like the films about Ruritania and other fictitious in all Balkan countries¹¹, while the novel *The Secret of Chimneys* was published in Romania only in 1999¹².



Fig. 1. Queen Marie in 1920 (photo by unknown autor, public domain).

⁸ It is an offense for a Spanish, Portuguese, or Italian-speaking person. Here suggests that it is about Latin speakers.

⁹ King Carol II of Romania exiled his brother Nicolae (1903–1977) after the latter had married in 1931 a woman without a title, Ioana Doletti. Prince Nicholas in the novel lived abroad and married widow Virginia Revel. However, it is about mere coincidence as Agatha Christie could not take into account the destiny of prince Nicolae as she had published the novel in 1925.

¹⁰ It is about the film *Vingt ans après* (1922, France, d. Henri Diamant-Berger). See „Cenzura cinematografică”, *Presa*, Year 1, no. 74, June 1, 1923, p. 4.

¹¹ See also Marian Țuțui, “Aristocrats and Villains of Balkan Origin”, *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei. Seria Muzică, Teatru, Cinema*, vol. 10–11 (54–55), 2016–2017.

¹² Agatha Christie, *Secretul de la Chimneys*, Excelsior Multi Press, Bucharest, 1999.

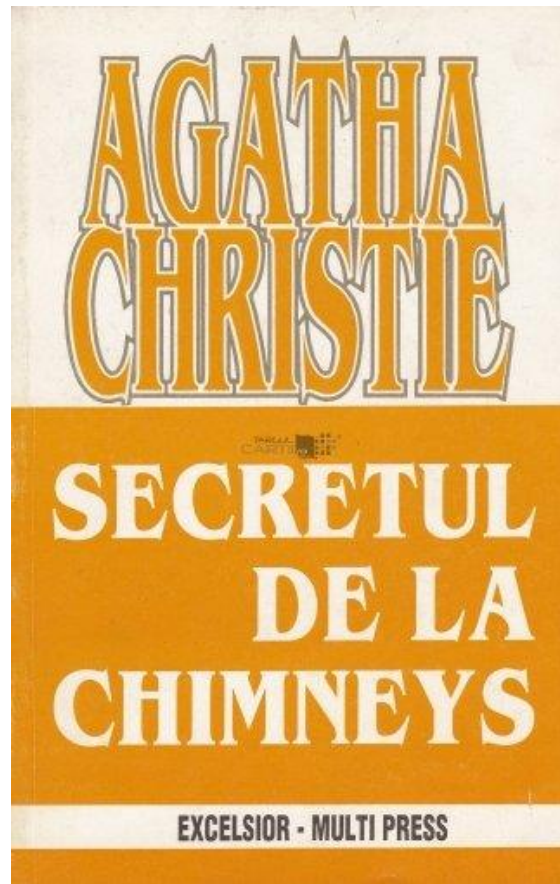


Fig. 2. The Romanian edition of the novel *The Secret at Chimneys* by Agatha Christie.

In Driving Miss Daisy (1989, USA, Bruce Beresford) there is also a mention of Queen Marie of Romania. A wealthy Jewish widow from Atlanta (Jessica Tandy) scolds Hoke (Morgan Freeman), her son's chauffeur, for parking the limousine in front of the synagogue: "What will my acquaintances say? I am not the Queen of Romania." Although her son had become a wealthy factory owner, the former teacher continued an austere life and did not want to expose her wealth. The old lady actually makes a reference to Queen Mary's five-week visit to the USA in October and November 1926¹³. She remembers this event after 25 years. She must have been really impressed when she was young, although the queen never traveled south of Virginia or set foot in Georgia. Indeed, the Queen of Romania had become "for a while the most popular woman from the country"¹⁴, as the American press pointed out. However, the queen was not exactly an exotic foreigner from Eastern Europe. Just the fact that he wore the crown of Romania was something exotic for the American public. Otherwise, her mother tongue was English, for she had been born on the island as the daughter of a British duke and a Russian duchess; at fifty she was still a beautiful woman and moreover she was cosmopolitan and cultured. (Fig. 3)

¹³ Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, *Regina Maria și America*, Noi Media Print, Bucharest, 2009, p. 130.

¹⁴ Idem, p. 9.



Fig. 3. Queen Marie in New York (1926), still from the film of the visit.

A feminist and patriotic monster

I recently came across a real female monster in the biopic *Queen Marie of Romania* (2019, Alexis Cahill, Brigitte Drottloff). I call such a character “a feminist and patriotic monster”. It may sound shocking and harsh. But etymologically the term is quite justified¹⁵.

I use the term monster because we deal with a something unbelievable as well as a kind of pious fraud even if it is about a fiction film. The queen was undoubtedly a remarkable historical figure, a beautiful and smart woman, but in this film in order to highlight her qualities, the filmmakers most often are not able to find words and deeds that made her mark history, but do the opposite, minimizing and caricaturing the statesmen (obviously exclusively men at that time) with whom she had to deal. **(Fig. 4)** I can accept that the queen would have eclipsed her husband King Ferdinand, the prime minister Ion Brătianu, even the prime ministers of Great Britain and France, David Lloyd George and George Clemenceau, but also the US president Woodrow Wilson and other men in the film are downright dominated by the queen. It is just hard for me to accept something like that and I start to smile. **(Fig. 5)** In a similar way I accept that Uma Thurman is beautiful and Quentin Tarantino is a magician, but I cannot help but laugh when I see in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003) Uma Thurman jumping two meters high and fighting with ten men at the same time, even if she is using a Japanese sword and wearing sneakers, not high-heels! Tarantino is indeed an ingenious creator of uchronies who is able to bring to the screen a black gunman during slavery times in *Django Unchained* (2012), as well as commandos units made up of Hebrews during WW2 in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009).

Most of the reviews notice an overdose of the female perspective, of feminism. For example, a review by Ionuț Mareș is called “Maria, Queen of Romania”. Sweetish feminism”¹⁶.

¹⁵ It derives from the Latin verb “monere” It means “to remind”, “to prevent” and often referred to a huge being or a person with a frightening deformity.

¹⁶ Ionuț Mareș, “*Maria, Regina României. Feminism dulceag*”, *Metropolis*, November, 7, 2019, <https://www.ziarulmetropolis.ro/maria-regina-rom%C3%A2niei-feminism-siropos/>



Fig. 4. Queen Marie (Roxana Lupu) and King Ferdinand (Daiel Plier) in the film *Queen Marie of Romania*.



Fig. 5. Queen Marie (Roxana Lupu) and Ionel Brătianu (Adrian Titieni) in the film *Queen Marie of Romania*.

Final conclusions

Predrag Matvejević noticed that “It is not only in the Balkans that history is primarily written as a national history. It is commonly observed through reading grids that are too particular or particularistic, often folkloric or epic. Even a defeat or an injury can be promoted to the rank of “founding event” or take on disproportionate proportions in the consciousness or imagination, and this for centuries”¹⁷. I am glad that after a long time of *a priori* rejection and even a kind of excommunication of film director Sergiu Nicolaescu and screenwriter Titus Popovici with their historical films made in the 70s and 80s they are finally analyzed as works of art by Romanian critics. Even though Nicolaescu and Popovici were the most visible

¹⁷ Predrag Matvejević, “Balkan Contradictions”, *La Revue des Ressources*, Saturday January 18, 2003, <https://www.larevuedesressources.org/Contradictions-balkaniques.html>.

representatives of the rhetoric of national communism promoted by Nicolae Ceaușescu, were not just negative characters, whether their artistic merits are recognized or whether it is admitted that even in the USA exist similar approaches. In this respect Andrei Gorzo notices that Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) has much in common with our national propaganda in historical films¹⁸.

A young film critic, Cristian Caloian, takes things further by noting that “Sergiu Nicolaescu just learned English”¹⁹. This is the title of his review of the movie *Queen Marie of Romania!* He is very harsh: “This film could have had a strong feminist touch [...] However, those who made it preferred a conventional film. A kind of docu-drama packaged as a fiction film, which brings to the public truths hidden for too long, but remains captive in the flat conventions of first-generation television. The director Alexis Sweet Cahill has, moreover, a consistent experience in the production of documentaries and TV series. Serious (and unexpected for the year of grace 2019) is the fact that the story remains tributary to national-communist propaganda, reheating the same historical saga good only to move the masses. Only the dolls were changed (from ancient voivodes to modern royal figures); the tune remained the same. So the approach is strictly encomiastic. In fact, it ends up being so flat that you question the soundness of the documentation. Could the film crew have found no shadow, no decay? Not even the famous adultery of the era – the juicy episode with Prince Știrbey – is exploited / developed / problematized”²⁰.

For my part, I would like to add to these conclusions another, one inspired by biology. In biology they say that function creates the organ and vice versa: unused muscles atrophy. That is why, unfortunately, after 1990 and the fall of communism we have not made much progress in the production of historical films because we barely made a few after quite a long time.

¹⁸ “*Lincoln* is a page of pop-official American historiography (that is, of a school textbook), screened / “entertained” by two tried-and-tested showmen-educators: Steven Spielberg and playwright Tony Kushner”. (Andrei Gorzo, “The National Epic – *Lincoln*”, 2012).

¹⁹ Cristian Caloian, “Sergiu Nicolaescu tocmai a învățat englezește – *Queen Marie of Romania* la Les Films de Cannes à Bucarest”, Liternet, 2019, <https://agenda.liternet.ro/articol/24064/Cristian-Caloian/Sergiu-Nicolaescu-tocmai-a-invatat-englezește-Queen-Marie-of-Romania-la-Les-Films-de-Cannes-a-Bucarest-2019.html>.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

